

Forest Legacy LWCF Project

Gulf Coastal Longleaf Initiative - Phase 2

Multi-State Effort (Alabama, Florida). Santa Rosa County Florida

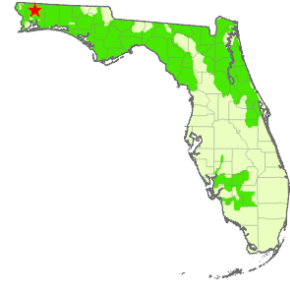


FUNDING HISTORY

FY 2018 Forest Legacy Program Funding	\$3,250,000
FY 2018 Non-Federal Cost Share	\$3,250,000
FY 2018 Project Costs	\$6,500,000
FY 2018 Project Acres	3,290

Forest Legacy Funding To Date	\$0
Total Project Costs	\$9,566,000
Total Project Acres	5,961

★ Project Location
Forest Legacy Areas



Tract Name	Size (ac)	Tract Cost	FLP Funding	Non-Fed Cost Share	Status
Phase 1	2,671	\$3,066,000	\$2,290,000	\$776,000	President's Request 2017
Phase 2	3,290	\$6,500,000	\$3,250,000	\$3,250,000	Proposed 2018

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Originally encompassing over 90 million acres, longleaf forests have been reduced to just 4.7 million acres, with most of the remnants scattered across public lands. Maintained by regular fire, they are one of the most threatened and ecologically diverse ecosystems in the world, with 900 species found nowhere else on earth and 30 federally threatened/endangered species. The Gulf Coastal Longleaf Initiative - Phase 2 (GCLI) will protect 3,290 acres in two parcels via CONSERVATION EASEMENT, which will be restored/maintained as a working longleaf forest in perpetuity. It is part of an ambitious effort in Florida/Alabama to conserve 205,000 acres in the same ownership and restore 150,000 acres of longleaf. This is the largest longleaf restoration effort on private lands in history. It is an unprecedented opportunity to make significant progress towards the America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative's goal to increase longleaf to eight million acres by 2025 and will serve as a model for other private forest owners to restore lands essential to reestablishing longleaf across its historic range, 90% of which is in private ownership. With over 25 partners, GCLI will build upon more than 18,000 acres of easements already in progress.



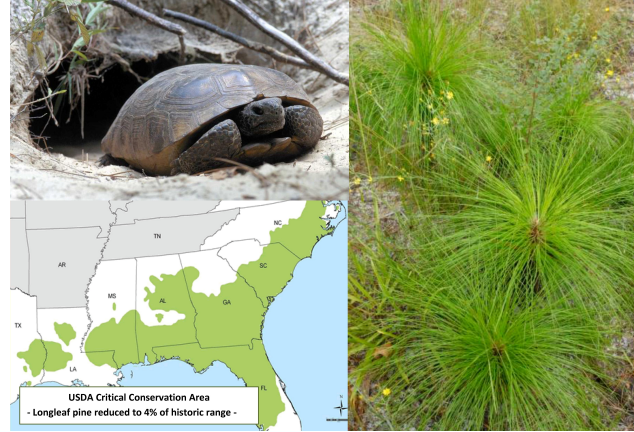
Potential model/ game-changing opportunity for longleaf ecosystem restoration. (Photo by Jimmy Bullock)

PROJECT FEATURES

Important

- **ECONOMIC BENEFITS-TIMBER:** In the Santa Rosa/Escambia County region, forest-related industries infuse over \$2 billion into the economy. GCLI will create/retain critical forest-related jobs; develop and expand markets for longleaf lumber, poles and specialty products; and keep land on local tax rolls.
- GCLI supports 1,800-2,000 forest-related jobs including mill workers, loggers, foresters and contractors, in an area whose economy depends heavily on these activities. GCLI generates ±15,000 tons of pine pulpwood annually which supplies nine local mills and has an estimated annual value of \$400,000.
- GCLI contains the following acreages: planted pine (loblolly, longleaf, slash - 2,900 acres); natural areas (water, stream buffers, uplands – 299 acres); non-forest (roads, food plots, logging ramps - 90). Planted pine will be converted to longleaf and fire applied at least once every four years.

- Longleaf forests are unique with an open, grassy understory, maintained by regular fire. The increased use of prescribed fire will improve habitat, create jobs for fire crews and reduce wildfires (a significant economic benefit). In five years, use of fire has increased on larger ownership by 25%.
- GCLI is third party certified under the Sustainable Forestry Initiative and follows existing forest management plans. Once under easement, an updated management plan will guide conversion from loblolly and slash pine to longleaf as current stands reach final harvest age.
- GCLI contains soils suitable for forestry and agriculture, with the largest groups being Dothan, Troup and Fuquay soil types. At present, the average site index for pine trees (all species) is 62 feet at 25 years of age. The site contains soils that are very suitable for longleaf pine restoration.
- ECONOMIC BENEFITS NON-TIMBER:** Alternative annual income is generated from GCLI through recreational/hunting licenses, a common practice in this area, with approximately 450 visitors annually. Common game species include bobwhite quail, white-tailed deer and turkey.
- GCLI buffers nearby Naval Air Station Whiting Field and Eglin Air Force Base (both critical economic drivers) from residential development incompatible with their missions. Whiting is the busiest air station in the world, supporting $\pm 14,600$ jobs and having an economic impact of $\pm \$1$ billion.
- A section of land adjacent to the western boundary of GCLI will become a naval airfield as early as fall of 2018, replacing an existing airfield whose use has been hindered by encroaching development. GCLI will help protect the new airfield from incompatible development.
- THREATENED OR ENDANGERED SPECIES HABITAT:** GCLI provides habitat for federally listed/candidate species including gopher tortoise, eastern indigo snake, narrow pigtoe, round ebonyshell and fuzzy pigtoe mussels [Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI)]. Gulf sturgeon inhabit waters downstream.
- GCLI provides habitat for state listed species including alligator snapping turtle, gopher frog, little blue heron, harlequin darter, blackmouth shiner, bluenose shiner, Florida flame azalea, white-topped pitcher plant, hairy-peduncled beaksedge and Turk's cap lily (FNAI).
- GCLI represents a significant opportunity to expand protected gopher tortoise habitat on private lands. Gopher tortoise (state threatened/federal candidate) are present on GCLI's uplands and their burrows provide habitat for as many as 360 animal species (Gopher Tortoise Council).
- FISH, WILDLIFE, PLANTS AND UNIQUE FOREST COMMUNITIES:** In addition to those above, GCLI contains habitat for more than 34 species of concern, such as Florida black bear, swallow-tailed kite, Bachman's sparrow, prairie warbler, Florida floater mussel, alligator gar, rough shiner and others (FNAI).
- GCLI contains 299 acres of natural communities in good condition, primarily wet areas with abundant streams and bottomland forests. GCLI supports over 175 resident and migratory bird species that rely on these forests for stopover, breeding and wintering habitat (state lands mgmt. plans, ebird.org).
- Once replanted in longleaf, the reintroduction of fire, longer rotation timber management and the elimination of heavy mechanical site-prep will dramatically improve habitat for additional rare and protected species associated with the longleaf pine ecosystem.
- WATER SUPPLY AND WATERSHED PROTECTION:** GCLI protects the watershed of the Gulf of Mexico. Surface waters flow into Big Coldwater Creek (a state paddling trail), the Blackwater River (an Outstanding Florida Water), Yellow River Marsh Aquatic Preserve, Blackwater Bay and ultimately the Gulf.
- GCLI contains over seven miles of streams that, along with surrounding bottomland forests, clean and filter surface waters from nearby agriculture/development. GCLI recharges a sand and gravel aquifer that is the primary source of potable water for $\pm 161,000$ Santa Rosa County residents.

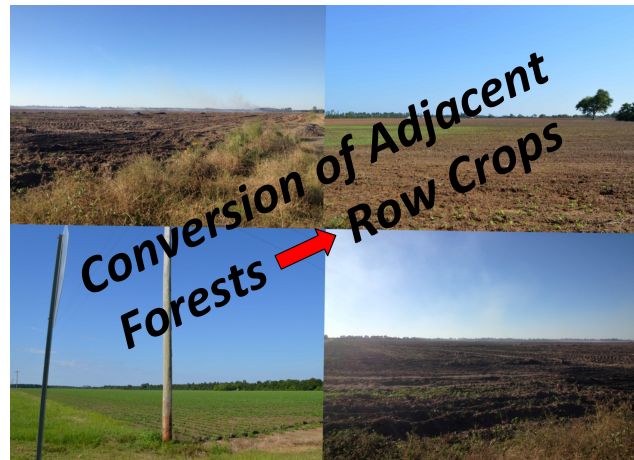


Longleaf pine historic range; critical habitat for Threatened gopher tortoise. (Photo by Dan Hipes)

- **PUBLIC ACCESS:** Pursuant to local tradition, the landowner provides access to GCLI to more than 450 individuals and guests per year via hunting/recreational licenses for hunting, fishing, camping, hiking, horseback riding and birding. Many are local families who have used this land for generations.
- **SCENIC:** GCLI protects the view-shed along nine miles of public road frontage, popular with the area's large cycling community, including County Rd 178, State Rd 89 and Springhill Rd. It also protects the Big Coldwater Creek state paddling trail, a scenic waterway that enjoys substantial public use.
- **HISTORIC/CULTURAL/TRIBAL:** This area was occupied by the Pensacola and other Native American tribes and is the heart of the state's historic timber industry. GCLI contains one 20th century American site listed in Florida's historical records and there are 94 known sites in the larger ownership.

Threatened

- **LACK OF PROTECTION:** GCLI is zoned Agriculture, allowing forestry, agriculture, subdivision and residential/commercial development at a density of one unit per 15 acres. It lacks any legal restrictions to prevent fragmentation or conversion to more intensive uses.
- The 2007 Santa Rosa County Rural Development Plan identifies a significant portion of GCLI as containing prime farmland. The County is a leader in the state in the production of peanuts, cotton and number of acres in Class I prime farmland, making conversion to row crops a significant threat.
- **LAND AND LANDOWNER CIRCUMSTANCES:** GCLI was acquired by the current owner in 2006 from International Paper. As a Timber Investment Management Organization with obligations to investors, the landowner has a limited window to sell an easement.
- Over the past several years, the owner received several offers to purchase their property for conversion to intensive agriculture. In light of the new naval airfield, there is a significantly increased threat of commercial and residential development in the surrounding area as well.
- Given current trends in forestry, agriculture and development and the fact this landowner has a unique vision but a narrowing window to complete it, this is likely the last time the opportunity will exist to conserve these lands as an intact, working longleaf forest and prevent fragmentation.
- **ADJACENT LAND USE:** Most of the adjacent land not owned by this owner has been converted to row crops, such as peanuts, cotton and corn. Conversion of forests to farmland, including thousands of acres adjacent to GCLI, has greatly increased due to rising commodity prices.
- GCLI is under numerous flyways including those of Eglin, Whiting and the new naval airfield. Eglin and Whiting complete over 100,000 operations/year in the area. Recent base realignment and closures in other areas increased use/training at these bases and development pressure in the region.
- Residential development is greatly on the rise in Santa Rosa County, in particular in the area around the project. 2013-2014 saw \$150 million in investment in residential construction, the most in a single year since 2006. It also saw 1,155 residential building permits issued, the most since 2007.
- Santa Rosa County is one of Florida's fastest growing counties, within one of the nation's fastest growing regions. From 2000-2010, the county's population grew by 28.6%. GCLI's proximity to abundant waters and beaches (30 miles south) intensifies development pressure.
- **ABILITY TO DEVELOP:** GCLI is highly developable with nine miles of road frontage on paved public roads. With over 90% of the site containing well-drained upland soils, available electricity and an underlying aquifer for water, GCLI can be easily converted for both rural development and row crops.



Thousands of acres of adjacent forestland converted for row crops. (Photo by Eric Howell)

Strategic

- **CONSERVATION STRATEGY:** GCLI is an unprecedented effort to conserve land and restore longleaf over a vast area under the same ownership and serve as a model for other private forest owners. The project will enhance the largest contiguous area of longleaf in the world - including Blackwater State Forest, Conecuh National Forest and Eglin Air Force Base - totaling over one million acres.
- **CONSERVATION PLAN-NATIONAL:** GCLI is within the largest Significant Geographic Area identified as a priority in the Range-Wide Conservation Plan for Longleaf Pine. It will also significantly further the America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative's goal to reach eight million acres of longleaf by 2025. Engaging with large private forest owners is critical to the success of these plans.
- GCLI will further U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) efforts to restore longleaf, including those above in which they are partners; private landowner incentive programs; numerous longleaf Land and Water Conservation Fund proposals; and the USFS Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program. It will also further the recovery plan for the eastern indigo snake.
- GCLI furthers Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) programs, including their Longleaf Pine Initiative; Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), Critical Conservation Area - Longleaf Pine Range; Gulf of Mexico Initiative, Escambia/Blackwater River Focus Area; and FY17-18 Gopher Tortoise Implementation Strategy.
- GCLI will provide a permanent greenspace buffer around the new naval airfield, Whiting and Eglin, thereby supporting national security. It will help prevent future land use conflicts, protect flight paths and provide long-term planning ability for the Dept. of Defense. The landowner is willing to allow compatible military training and GCLI could provide conservation mitigation opportunities.
- **CONSERVATION PLAN-REGIONAL:** GCLI is located in the heart of the Gulf Coastal Plain Ecosystem Partnership (GCPEP), a partnership of public/private landowners in NW Florida/SE Alabama to conserve and restore the longleaf ecosystem. In 2015, the landowner became an official partner in GCPEP, and GCLI is now their top multi-state conservation priority to reestablish longleaf.
- **CONSERVATION PLAN-STATE:** GCLI supports Florida's Forest Action Plan by addressing several issues of importance to the state including supporting sustainable forest markets, reducing further fragmentation of longleaf ecosystems, meeting the challenges of climate change, improving economic viability of forests and protecting water quality and quantity.
- GCLI forwards Florida's State Wildlife Action Plan by protecting longleaf pine/savanna (a designated endangered ecosystem), preventing habitat loss/fragmentation, protecting water resources and increasing prescribed fire. GCLI is located within a high priority for the Florida Ecological Greenway Network thereby increasing connectivity and is highly ranked on the State's Florida Forever list.
- **COMPLEMENT PROTECTED LANDS:** Highlighting the national significance of the overall project, the landowner has been awarded a \$5 million federal (RCPP) grant to acquire a conservation easement on 4,400 acres south of GCLI. The acquisition process is underway and the purchase of that conservation easement is anticipated soon.
- The landowner is also in the process of completing an easement on 4,252 acres south of the project with the State of Florida's Rural and Family Lands Protection Program, and an additional 9,998 acres was recently ranked in the top tier in their most recent cycle. GCLI will also build upon two FY2017 USFS Forest Legacy Program projects - Wolfe Creek Forest and GCLI Phase 1, pending budget approval.



GCLI supports continued military operations and greenspace buffer for airfields. (Photo by Joseph Pick, U.S. Air Force)

Readiness

Pre-Appraisal/Market Analysis	1
Easement or Fee Conditions	1
Non-Federal Cost Share Commitment	1
Signed Purchase Agreement	0
Title Search	1
Mineral Determination	0
Stewardship Plan (or equivalent)*	1
Readiness Total Tally Score	5

Supporting Parties

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service; Florida Forest Service; Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission; Florida Department of Environmental Protection; Northwest Florida Water Management District; Gulf Coastal Plain Ecosystem Partnership; National Fish and Wildlife Foundation; The Conservation Fund; The Longleaf Alliance; Florida Wildlife Federation; Audubon Florida; Florida Defenders of the Environment; U.S. Representative Jeff Miller; and U.S. Senator Bill Nelson.

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